DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 113 719 CS 202 302

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TITLE Assessing English and Language Arts Teachers' Attitudes toward Writers and Writing.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the New York State English Council (25th, Buffalo, October 9-11, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Changing Attitudes; Class Attitudes; *Composition (Literary); Creative Writing; Educational Research; English Instruction; Evaluation Methods; Language Arts; *Measurement Instruments; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Attitude Assessment

ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that if English and language arts teachers will examine their attitudes toward writers and writing, and compare their attitudes with those held by successful writers, they may come to hold a more realistic idea of what the process of writing is like. An attitude scale dealing with writers and writing was administered to 23 graduate students who were all experienced teachers at the beginning of a five-week summer session course on teaching written composition. The scale included 40 items under three major categories: skills of writing, varieties of writing, and different kinds of writers. At the conclusion of the course, the attitude scale was again administered to the teachers. From the data it was concluded that, on the average, these teachers changed their attitudes toward writing and writers. (TS)

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Assessing English and Language Arts Teachers' Attitudes toward Writers and Writing

Robert W. Blake

Most English and language arts teachers that I meet want to do a better job of teaching writing. Some have had courses in writing. They have read recent books on writing which give sensible suggestions about how to help students write poetry and various kinds of prose. These teachers, furthermore, have tried out such techniques with their students and found them successful. They work, and the kids like them.

Many other English and language arts teachers are quite different. They have had no classes in writing other than in high school and a college freshman composition course which seem, for the most part, to have turned them off to any further writing. Almost uniformly, they report that they learned how to pick a topic, outline it, and write an essay of from three to five paragraphs. The essay would have an introduction, body, and conclusion, with each paragraph having a topic sentence--either stated or inferred--supporting details, and a conclusion.

When they got their papers back, though, the teachers also report that they were so covered with red marks and caustic comments that they became paralyzed at the idea of ever writing again. One young lady told of a high school English teacher who had a rubber stamp with the figure of a garbage pail and the word "garbage." When the teacher was upset with a student's writing, he showed his disdain by stamping "garbage" on it. No wonder his students were afraid to write.

I should like to thank my colleague in measurement and evaluation, Morris Beers, who--to paraphrase a close friend of his--asked me to produce more data than I thought I needed.

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When these teachers taught writing the way they had been taught, they found the kids didn't much care for written composition, and they liked the whole business even less. If you think I exaggerate, then talk to some English language arts teachers about how they teach writing. Or, better yet, visit them in their classes and see how they do the job.

No matter what they feel about teaching writing, though, these teachers keep coming back to college to take writing courses, and I marvel at them. No small number seem fearful and lack confidence in their own ability to write, but they return to classes with the hope that they can learn part of the mysterious act that has eluded them so far. Although they believe they can't write and don't much like to teach writing, they also believe that it's part of their responsibility as English and language arts teachers to teach composition as well as they possibly can.

This is a long introduction to a paper on assessing the attitudes of teachers towards writers and writing, but I think that many of the problems that English teachers have with teaching writing surface in statements about their attitudes towards writers and the act of writing. If they assume, for instance, that teaching writing consists of having students write compositions, following an outline such as the one I have mentioned and then in discovering mechanical errors in a first draft, they will teach writing in this manner. If, on the other hand, they feel that one should treat a first draft as professional writers do, as initial copy to be revised and reworked, then they will teach writing quite differently.

So, at the very least, if English and language arts teachers can examine their attitudes towards writers and writing and compare their attitudes with those held by successful writers, they may come to hold a more realistic idea of what the process of writing is like. And hopefully,

such teachers, after practice in creating varieties of writing and in discussing their writing with others, will change substantially their attitudes toward writers and writing. And, it should follow, if they have more positive feelings toward writing, they should feel more secure in their ability to teach others to write and, on the basis of their modified attitudes, change what they do in the classroom.

With these thoughts in mind, I decided to develop and try out an attitude scale on writers and writing with graduate students in a concentrated, five-week summer session course, "Teaching Written Composition, K-12." In the class were six high school English teachers, one high school social sciences teacher, seven junior high school English teachers, five elementary school language arts teachers, one high school remedial writing teacher, one college learning skills center teacher, and one high school teacher who taught English as a second language in the American School in Rio de Janeiro. All were experienced teachers. The classes lasted for one and one-half hours per day, five days a week for five weeks.

What I planned to do was this. I wanted to prepare an attitude scale dealing with writers and writing, have the college students take the scale at the beginning of the course, do an analysis of the items in the scale to find out which discriminated between those students who scored high and those who scored low, conduct a course on the teaching of writing which, I believed, would include varieties of writing and would realistically reflect the writing process, and then have the students take the scale at the end of the course to find out whether or not their attitudes had changed as a result of the course. I was aware, of course, of just how difficult it is to change anyone's attitudes over such a short period of time, but like all curious teachers, I wanted to find out whether or not my course would actually make a difference in what the students thought about writing.

A word about what I believe my audience to be. The paper is addressed to you English and language arts teachers who may or may not have had a beginning course in educational measurement. So I'd like to describe how I set up the attitude scale and treated the data so that you can create your own attitude scale from my directions. This report is not intended for the educational measurement specialist, who would no doubt be impatient with my narration.

First, I made up a list of statements, both negative and positive, about writing. For the statements, I drew on what professional writers had said about writing and on my own experiences with writing and teaching writing over a period of twenty years. The statements I grouped into three categories.

There were 18 items in the first category, which I call the Skills of Writing. Included in it were items like these:

Skills of Writing

		Positive Statement	Negative Statement
Topic:	Strong Verbs	I emphasize active verbs in my writing.	Passive verbs make writing style smooth.
Topic:	Varied Sentence Structure	I believe it is necessary to revise the sentences in my writing so that they are varied: some short, some long, and so forth.	The ideas in writing are important, not the kinds of sentences used.
Topic:	Audience	I believe it's important to have an audience firmly in mind before you begin to write.	When I write, I write for myself only and don't think at all about the people who might read what I write.

Other statements in the category of Skills of Writing elicit attitudes towards topics such as the use of words to refer to concrete things, wordiness and repetition, overworked phrases (clichés), figurative language, and mechanical errors like correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

The second category I call Varieties of Writing, and statements in this category, of which there were 16, were designed to reflect a person's willingness to write different pieces.

Varieties of Writing

		Positive Statement	Negative Statement
Topic:	Letter Writing	I get a kick out of writing letters.	I almost never write letters.
Topic:	Character Sketch	I like to write about people I know well.	It doesn't make much sense to try to describe a person writing.

Statements about other Varieties of Writing dealt with short stories, plays, letters to the editor, and poems.

In the third category were 6 statements, dealing with attitudes toward Different Kinds of Writers.

Kinds of Writers

		Positive Statement	Negative Statement
Topic:	Fiction Writers	I admire writers of fiction.	I don't think short story and novel writers are very useful.
Topic:	Poets	I believe the poet is a valuable member of society.	Poets don't contribute anything of importance to our culture.
Topic:	Newspaper Writers	I'd like to be a writer for a newspaper.	A newspaper writer's job doesn't seem like much to me.

I then arranged the positive and negative statements in the form of a Likert-type attitude measure in this fashion.

Directions: For each of the following statements about writers and writing, encircle the abbreviations for the words which best describe your opinion about the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Trying to write poetic language is a waste of time to me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I'd like to be a writer for a newspaper.	SA	A	U	D	SD

The Attitude Scale: Writers and Writing was given to the students on the first meeting day. The positive statements were assigned scores of Strongly Agree--5; Agree--4; Undecided--3; Disagree--2; and Strongly Disagree--1. The negative statements were given reverse scorings with Strongly Agree--1; Agree--2; Undecided--3; Disagree--4; and Strongly Disagree--5. The highest possible score was thus 200, and the lowest possible score, 40.

In order to find out which of the forty items discriminated between those students who scored high on the scale and those who scored low, I ranked the papers from highest to lowest, took the scales of the top twenty-seven percent (six papers) and the lowest twenty-seven percent (again six), and did an item analysis of the forty items. This is how the process works with the first two items. First, I calculated the ratio of the possible score for the high and low groups independently. So for the low scoring students on the first item "I almost never write letters," there are a possible 21 out of 30 points, the ratio of which is .70. For the high

scoring students, the ratio for 19 out of 30 is .63, the difference being -.07. This item discriminated all right, but in a negative fashion, in a direction contrary to that which I expected. In other words, the high scoring students liked to write letters even less than did the low scoring students.

Item Analysis of Test Items

Statements from Attitude Scale	Total pts. awarded by 27% of low-scoring students	Ratio	Total pts. awarded by 27% of high-scoring students	Ratio	Discrimination Index
I almost never write letters.	21	.70	19	.63	-.07
Trying to write poetic language is a waste of time to me.	22	.73	28	.93	.20

*Item retained because of high discrimination.

As you can see, the next item, "Trying to write poetic language is a waste of time to me." was highly discriminating. The ratio for the low scoring students, 21 out of a possible 30 points, was .73 and for the high scoring students, 28 out of 30 points, was .93. When we subtract the ratio of the low scoring group from the ratio of the high scoring group, we arrive at the Discrimination Index of .20. Usually, to be acceptable, items must show a Discrimination Index of equal to or greater than .20 ($\geq$ .20), but since I wanted 20 items, I accepted 3 with Discrimination Indexes of .16 and 1 of .17. The remaining 16 were at .20 or above.

As far as items discriminating within the categories, there were 7 which discriminated out of the 18 in the category of Skills of Writing, 10 out of 16 in Varieties of Writing, and 3 out of 6 in Kinds of Writers.

A few words might be in order about some of the items that were discarded. At the end of the course, the students took the entire Attitude

Scale of forty items again, and after they had finished, they discussed their personal reactions to each item. Generally, the items that did not discriminate seemed to be one of two kinds.

First, some did not reflect a clear case for good or poor writing; neither low-nor high-scorers could agree on them. For instance, I thought Mark Twain's epigram "As to the adjective: when in doubt, strike it out" would be a fine item, but it showed no discrimination between low-and high-scorers; the score was 12 to 12, with a .00 difference. The negative statement for using adjectives fared even worse: "Ar expert writer makes his writing come alive with descriptive adjectives." The score was 12 for low-scorers and 9 for high-scorers, with a -.10 difference. A good number of the high-scorers obviously believed that professional writers use many descriptive adjectives.

For other statements, both low-and high-scorers agreed to the extent that there was little difference between the items. Both groups, for instance, concurred with this item: "I make sure I proofread carefully my writing for mechanical errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and word usage" to the tune of 24--26, with a Discrimination Index of .03. And likewise with the statement, "I emphasize active verbs in my writing"; the lows had 19, the highs 21, with a Discrimination Index of .10.

Using a split-half technique and the Spearman-Brown Prophecy Formula, I computed the reliability coefficient, which is .852. (You can look up the process and formula in any educational measurement textbook.) Any scale like this which has a coeffecient of .85 or better is quite reliable. In layman's terms, this means that students who re-take the attitude scale would score on it in about the same position; they would not have any marked up's or down's. When any test is reliable, in other words, it is consistent.

ATTITUDE SCALE: WRITERS AND WRITING

Last name, First MI

Date

Directions: For each of the following statements about writers and writing, encircle the abbreviations for the words which best describe your opinion about the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Trying to write poetic language is a waste of time to me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
2. I'd like to be a writer for a newspaper.	SA	A	U	D	SD
3. I'd rather do almost anything than write a scene for a play.	SA	A	U	D	SD
4. Writing poems seems kind of useless to me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
5. I believe it is necessary to revise the sentences in my writing so that they are varied: some short, some long, and so forth.	SA	A	U	D	SD
6. I admire writers of fiction.	SA	A	U	D	SD
7. Effective writers use many general terms and abstractions.	SA	A	U	D	SD
8. I like to write something every day.	SA	A	U	D	SD
9. I believe the poet is a valuable member of the society.	SA	A	U	D	SD
10. I would like to be able to write poems that could be published.	SA	A	U	D	SD

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
11. I believe it is necessary to revise what I write.	SA	A	U	D	SD
12. Being able to write a short story isn't one of the things that I want to do in life.	SA	A	U	D	SD
13. I enjoy writing figurative language like similes, metaphors, and personification.	SA	A	U	D	SD
14. I like to write about people I know well.	SA	A	U	D	SD
15. I would like to be able to write a short story that could be published.	SA	A	U	D	SD
16. The writer who uses those phrases developed over the years appeals to more.	SA	A	U	D	SD
17. The ideas in writing are important, not the kinds of sentences used.	SA	A	U	D	SD
18. The best writing is produced in the first draft.	SA	A	U	D	SD
19. Once I have written down what I have to say, I don't want to go over it again.	SA	A	U	D	SD
20. I don't ever write anything unless I am forced to.	SA	A	U	D	SD

After the students had taken the Attitude Scale for a second time at the end of the course, I selected only the twenty items that discriminated best and compiled the scores for the pre- and post-Attitude Scales. Three students had losses of 3, 2, and 1 points, but the remaining nineteen students showed gains on the post-Attitude Scale of from 1 to 25 points. The average score for the pre-Attitude Scale of 20 items was 74.95, and the average score for the post-Attitude Scale was 81.36, with an average gain of 6.41.

For the category of Skills of Writing with 7 items, the average score for the pre-test was 25.00, for the post-test 28.05, with a gain of 3.05. For the category of Varieties of Writing with 10 items, the average score for the pre-test was 36.32, for the post-test 40.23, with a gain of 3.91. And for the category of Kinds of Writers with 3 items, the average score for the pre-test was 12.18, for the post-test 12.27, with a gain of .09. It was obvious that the third category of Kinds of Writers contained too few items for it to measure any significant attitude change. More items should be added to this category, or it might just as well be dropped.

So what can we say about the Attitude Scale: Writers and Writing? After an intensive five-week course in the teaching of written composition, a group of twenty-two experienced elementary language arts and secondary school teachers, on the average, changed their attitudes toward writing and writers. Whether or not these teachers would change their behavior toward the teaching of writing is, of course, a different matter. I could only hope that their changed opinions about writing and writers would result in changed classroom practices.

There are, of course, obvious limitations to the Attitude Scale. It was aimed at experienced teachers of the English language arts, most of whom

had been English majors in college. The initial scores were therefore fairly high, with some gains slight. And, of course, the instruction which was to influence attitude change, occurred over a relatively short period of time.

Some of the items, furthermore, which did not discriminate for these individuals might be highly discriminating for a different group. The item "I make sure I proofread carefully my writing for mechanical errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and word usage." for instance, did not discriminate because it appeared that all teachers considered this necessary for good writing. A group of ninth grade students might react differently to such a statement.

And finally, there was no control group of students who might have taken the Attitude Scale before and after a different kind of writing course or even a group which took the Scale without any writing course at all. All we can finally say is that this group of particular individuals, in this situation, generally changed their attitudes about writing after a series of experiences with writing and what writers had to say about writing.

So much for the Attitude Scale itself. There are other ways to find out how people feel about an experience. One is to ask them. So at the end of the course, I asked the students to respond to this question.

> As a result of the experiences that you had with the course--reading books, writing different pieces, reading out loud your writing in groups, listening to student reports on techniques for encouraging public school students to write, and reading the instructor's comments on your writing--how do you feel about writing and the teaching of writing? Is the feeling different from the feeling that you had at the beginning of the course? If so, will you please explain?

Here are a few comments that are typical of those made by the students.

> I feel much better about my own writing. You really convinced all of us that we have it in us if we take the time. Since I have more confidence in my own writing, I therefore feel more competent to teach others writing.

> It happened. I've changed. I've improved as a writer simply because I am writing and am conscious of all the elements we've established as keys to good writing. "Show don't tell." "Exorcise Enfish." "Accentuate the active." "Reach for the refreshing." "Grab with the opener." I'm listening to myself again and filtering my experiences through all my senses, consciously searching for the small surprises which my perceptions can create.
>
> At the beginning of the course I was also discouraged with my job [high school remedial writing teacher] and felt at times it was hopeless. Through interaction with other teachers and my work on a writing program, I have reversed my feelings. I honestly believe I can do a better job teaching writing than I did last year.
>
> In general my feelings towards writing haven't changed. I knew it was hard work and difficult to maintain. I knew we taught ineffectively in many areas. The course and the writings did help me solidify the areas of weakness or foolishness, however, and give me encouragement to continue myself and the programs I use to reach the kids. It made me feel I was on the right track and not alone.
>
> I think I am more aware of the necessity to relax and enjoy what the students write. I don't mean lowering standards--accepting shoddy work--but accepting the work for what it is and enjoying it. Being aware of what goes into writing, I am more aware of what I want out of it.
>
> I have a tremendous amount of improving and editing to do but have a concrete awareness of some of my faults. I also feel more capable of teaching and assessing other people's writing. I hope that I will have the ability to criticize gently but effectively and be able to accept another's writing as the best expression of what he feels without forcing my feelings into his writing.

Is the Attitude Scale: Writers and Writing a valid one? Over a period of many years, I have read what many professional writers had to say about writing. And I have myself struggled with moving from half formed thoughts, to first drafts, to revisions, and finally to print, so that I think I have an accurate idea of what is involved in the writing process. Do the statements in the scale reflect written composing? And do they reflect healthy attitudes toward professional writers? I believe they do.

You might use such an attitude scale in at least two ways. First, you can use the scale, or one adapted to your purpose, to find out where your students are with regard to attitudes toward writing. If you find they have negative attitudes towards the Skills of Writing, for instance,

then you could provide instruction which would hopefully change these attitudes.

But more importantly, I think, a scale like this one would be helpful because it forces students to consider carefully what they believe about writing. Then if they are able to compare and contrast their beliefs with those held by others, they may be in a better position to strengthen attitudes which make sense and to discard those which don't. And, of course, we hope that as a result of their changed attitudes, they will change what they actually do when writing.

And finally, why bother with attitudes in the first place? Because how we feel is so closely tied up with what we do. In their classic Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook II: Affective Domain, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1956), David R. Krathwohl and others make a comment about attitudes which, I believe, has pertinence here.

> There are some instances where the cognitive route to affective achievement has resulted in learning just the opposite of that intended. Thus the infamous example of the careful and detailed study of "good" English classics, which was intended to imbue us with the love of deathless prose, has in many instances alienated us from it instead. (page 56)

The same position, I believe, is valid for the teaching of writing. If we teach intellectually about writing and neglect the feelings that our students have toward their writing, we may do the opposite of what we intend: turn them away from writers and writing, instead of helping them to realize how the process of writing can be at once an act of ordering one's private universe as well as a means for heightening one's awareness of his or her life. If an Attitude Scale can help a teacher or student come to a realization of this, then it may be of some value.